

What does America need from 4-H?

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Prepared for Connecticut 4-H Newsletter, Fall 2004

From its inception, this American idea- the 4-H Youth Development program- was about creating opportunities for young people to learn about the natural world, about technology, about themselves and their communities.

Original founders of 4-H such as Mr. Albert Belmont Graham, the superintendent of the Springfield Township Schools in Ohio, organized groups of boys and girls with the intent to learn more about harvesting corn, planting a garden, testing soil samples, tying knots in rope and identifying natural wildlife such as weeds and insects. Similarly, Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell, whose Nature Study movement was an instrumental part of the movement that became 4-H, counteracted the idea that learning must be about remote things and encouraged rural youth to accept the challenges of life around them. O.J. Kern, Superintendent of Schools in Winnebago County, Illinois organized Farm Boys Experiment Clubs designed to transfer agricultural technology to farmers through youth. And George Washington Carver, who taught his students that nature, is the greatest teacher and that education should be for the betterment of the people in the community forming a foundation for 4-H work.

4-H, with its emphasis on “learning by doing” began to impress upon schoolchildren the importance of becoming lifelong learners, of using the knowledge learned to become more efficient producers but to balance agricultural advancement with concerns for the quality of life in their communities and the protection of their environment. As our nation grew, public education was the cornerstone of this bold experiment in nation-building and 4-H connected youth to the universities and the research being conducted. 4-H became part of the larger effort on the part of the United States Department of Agriculture to connect citizens to rapidly developing advances in agricultural sciences and technology discovered by the Land-grant Universities. 4-H youth were often among the first to learn about the new scientific discoveries and related technologies and to apply them in real-world settings through their 4-H projects.

As we look forward to the next 100 years of 4-H, we might ask, “What does America need from 4-H during its second century?” Essentially, America needs 4-H Youth Development to continue creating opportunities for young people much like it has always done. For example, due to the approaching retirements of scientists in the baby boomer generation, the Department of Labor is predicting that within ten years, the American workplace will be 6 million short of the 18 million needed to replace our scientists. Add to that, the great need to continue informing the public about science and scientific advances that impact our daily lives. In 2001, only about 50% of adults surveyed by the National Science Foundation knew that it takes the earth one year to go around the sun, or that humans did not live at the same time as dinosaurs, or that antibiotics do not kill viruses.

In 4-H, we have youth actively doing science—from assessing water quality to determining DNA fingerprints, from interpreting ultrasound images to predicting the impact of zero gravity environments on every day objects—the opportunities to learn how to think, plan and reason are endless. 4-H Youth Development is the only youth program with direct access to technological

advances in agriculture and life sciences, family and consumer resource management, human development, nutrition and related areas, which result from land-grant university research. The foundation of 4-H Youth Development is in the practical application of the knowledge base generated by the land-grant university system by youth in their communities – what we call, “Learning by Doing.”

More than ever, in today’s world, America needs youth prepared to become leaders and active community citizens who are compassionate, and value life. In addition, we need future leaders who can understand scientific discoveries and their implications, who can analyze and make tough decisions, and who can ask relevant questions. The 4-H Pledge focuses on the importance of larger service and recognizing a responsibility for the welfare of others. For 100 years, 4-H Programs have focused youth on developing concern for others and taking action to demonstrate that concern. Whether through the Victory Gardens of the 1940’s, or the outpouring of service after 9/11 or the every day efforts important to the fabric of local communities – the projects to keep roadsides clean, to restore old cemeteries, to gather food for the less fortunate, or to provide guidance for younger children. This service forges bonds between youth and their communities, and creates a meaningful role for youth who are too often placed only in the role of consumer in today’s world.

4-H has been there for 100 years, creating opportunities for young people to learn by doing, to build skills, to refine analytical abilities, to exercise leadership, form relationships with caring adults and help their communities. As 4-H faces its second century, we know that it’s not just rural children who need these opportunities but all children, those living in urban and suburban areas, boys and girls of different income levels, ethnicities and religions. Another unique feature of 4-H, is that all youth are welcome in 4-H programs.

The core of 4-H, meeting youth needs and building life skills, is timeless and unchangeable. It is as relevant today as we face the second century, as it was at the last turn of the century when 4-H was developed to teach farming practices and food preservation techniques. But *how* we meet youth needs and build life skills continually changes. And *what* we teach – the new technologies, the latest advancements from our universities- also change. Adaptability in our programs and our delivery methods ensures that 4-H programs will continue to be vital experiences for young people.